

## Understanding the Vice Lists in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Galatians 5:19-21, and Ephesians 5:3-5

These three passages are similar in that they list sins and the consequence of those who commit them. The passages often confuse people. What kind of people do they describe, believers or unbelievers? What is the point of listing these sins for the original readers and for us today?

### Do believers lose their salvation if they commit these sins?

No. This would be a common Arminian position, but we can dismiss this interpretation because we know that salvation by grace means that works cannot earn (Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5) or forfeit salvation (Rom. 5:20; Col. 2:13-14). Besides, the sins named in the lists differ in each passage so there is no certain standard by which one would know that salvation is lost. Some sins are often and unfortunately seen in Christians: covetousness, hatred, angry outbursts, selfish ambition, envy, and drunkenness. Salvation by grace through faith excludes one's performance as a condition for gaining or keeping that salvation (see *GraceNotes* no. 24, "Eternally Secure").

### Do professing believers show they were never truly saved if they commit these sins?

This interpretation often comes from a Reformed theological approach which teaches that if God chooses those who believe and implants divine faith as a gift, then they would surely live and persevere to the end of their lives without major sin. Many would employ the phrase "Faith without works is dead" by which they mean that a life without evident good works (and/or a life of sin) shows faith never existed. But this position is theologically derived and comes from a misinterpretation of James 2:14-26 (see *GraceNotes* no. 2, "Faith and Works in James 2:14"). This interpretation also negates the free grace of God and salvation through faith alone because works becomes a necessary component or proof of salvation, and thus a condition. We can agree that good works *should* characterize a believer (Eph. 2:10), but they cannot prove or disprove one's salvation (see *GraceNotes* no. 28 "Can Good Works Prove Salvation?").

### Could these sins describe a believer in Christ?

There is no doubt that the sins listed could be committed by believers. That is the reason the apostle Paul exhorts his readers against doing them. The believers in Corinth were already doing wrong and cheating (1 Cor. 5:11; 6:6-8). The Galatian believers are told not to use their Christian freedom to serve their sinful flesh, which could happen if they do not walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:13, 16). Paul does not want the Ephesian believers to be deceived into committing these sins (Eph. 5:6-7). The Bible and real life verify the reality of sin in Christians. The better question is, "*Should* these sins characterize a believer in Christ?" The answer is obviously, "Never!"

### How then does Paul use the sin lists?

This question depends somewhat on what is meant by inheriting the kingdom of God. While some see a present aspect of the kingdom rule of God (1 Cor. 4:20; Eph. 2:6; Col. 1:13) in which believers can experience temporal rewards, inheriting the kingdom of God in these vice passages seems clearly to be future, as in other Pauline passages (1 Cor. 15:24, 50; Eph. 1:14, 18; Col. 3:24; 2 Tim. 4:1, 18).

With a future kingdom in view, there are two views that maintain the integrity of salvation by grace through faith alone. Both views assume, with good reason from the contexts, that the readers are believers. In First Corinthians, the contrast between unbelievers and believers is seen clearly in 6:1-9. In verse 1 we see the contrast of the “unrighteous” with the “saints” and in verse 6 the contrast between “brothers” and “unbelievers.” This helps define the unrighteous in verse 9 as unbelievers in contrast to the believing readers described as washed, sanctified, and justified in verse 11 (cf. 1:2). In Galatians it is clear the readers are believers (1:6-7; 3:26-27; 5:1) who are presented with the options of living according to the Spirit or according to the flesh (5:16-26). The sins of the flesh characterize the readers’ former lives as unbelievers (5:24). Vice lists are often used to describe unbelievers in the New Testament (cf. Rom. 1:29-32; Phil. 3:2; 2 Tim. 3:2-7; Titus 3:3; 1 Peter 4:3; Rev. 21:8). The Ephesian readers are called “saints” (1:1) and Paul reminds them they were saved (2:8). After confirming their position in Christ in chapters 1-3, the ethical concerns of chapters 4-6 are introduced in 4:1 with Paul’s exhortation to “walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.” Their conduct should therefore contrast with their former unsaved lives (4:17-32). Accordingly, the issue in Ephesians 5 is conduct “fitting for saints” (v. 3). Paul then contrasts the conduct of believers in the light with unbelievers in the darkness (vv. 1-18). They are not to be partakers with the unbelieving “sons of disobedience” (cf. 2:2-3) who experience the wrath of God (vv. 6-7). So, clearly, Paul’s readers of these three epistles are believers.

One view sees these passages as warnings to believers about losing rewards in eternity such as ruling with Jesus Christ. This interpretation takes “inherit” to mean fully possess or enjoy rich rewards in the future millennial kingdom of God based on performance or merit. While all believers will enter the kingdom, only faithful believers (who avoid the vices listed) will be rewarded. Inherit or inheritance is used to speak of enjoying future eternal rewards, including ruling with Christ, in a number of New Testament passages (Rom. 8:17b; Col. 3:24; 2 Tim. 2:11-13). However, in First Corinthians 15:50-53, inheriting the kingdom of God is unmerited and based on the believers’ resurrection in the church age.

Another view sees these passages as exhortations to believers not to behave like unbelievers. In other words, the vice lists describe the characteristics of unbelievers which Christians should not emulate. These unbelievers will not inherit the kingdom of God and enjoy its riches because they will not enter the kingdom, so why would believers want to identify with them? Galatians connects inheritance to the Abrahamic promise and faith in Christ, not performance (Gal. 3:18, 29; 4:1, 7, 30). Matthew 19:16 shows that to “have eternal life” is similar in meaning to “inherit eternal life” used in the two parallel accounts, Mark 10:17 and Luke 18:18. Inheriting the kingdom, if speaking of rewards, would necessarily include entering the kingdom. Those who enter the kingdom do so with the expectation of receiving rewards. The contrasts between believers and unbelievers are so pronounced in the contexts of these passages that this interpretation seems the stronger of the two.

## Conclusion

The vice lists in these three passages were not written to warn about losing salvation, or to identify those who falsely profess to be saved. They are written to motivate the readers to live up to their calling as new people in a new life. The sins listed characterize unbelievers whose behavior is contrasted with that which should characterize believers. This contrast is consistent and emphatic in each context. It is a sad fact that believers can live according to their sinful nature, the flesh, and look like unbelievers. Kingdom-bound Christians should not live like hell-bound non-Christians; it is incongruous with the new life, new position, and new identity given to those who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior. Such bad behavior would also forfeit rewards in this life and in the coming kingdom.